

Presenter: Commander, 3rd Brigade Combat Team 4th Infantry Division Col. John Hort and Leader, Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team 3 Theodore Andrews November 17, 2008

DoD News Briefing with Col. Hort From Iraq

(Note: The briefers appear via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning, and welcome. It looks like we have good video. Let me just make sure that they can hear us.

Colonel Hort, is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear us okay?

COL. HORT: I sure can, Bryan. Thank you. MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for taking some time this afternoon to be with us, and good morning to the press corps. We are privileged this morning to have with us Colonel John Hort, who is the commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. And with him is Dr. Theodore Andrew(s), who is the leader of the Baghdad Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team 3.

Colonel Hort assumed his duties in Iraq in December of 2007. Dr. Andrews arrived in March of 2008. And we are most fortunate to have them in this format for the first time, hopefully not the last time, if we're not too rough on them. And they are joining us today from Forward Operating Base (War) Eagle in Iraq.

They're going to have a few opening comments to kind of set the stage and then take some of your questions. So again, gentlemen, thank you for joining us and let me turn it over to you.

COL. HORT: Thank you, Bryan, and good morning, everybody. Colonel John Hort, as Bryan said, commander of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division.

I've got to my left here my partner in arms, Mr. Ted Andrews, who's the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team team leader 3 for the Department of State that is co-located with -- (inaudible word) -- at Camp War Eagle on the eastern side of the river in Baghdad. We commonly refer to ourselves as the "East Side Boys" because we're over on the east side, working with the Iraqi security force and the local Iraqi government to try to assist both of those elements in order to support security, essential services and governance as we've been doing now for about the last year that we've been in country.

Before I get into the opening comments, I do have to set the record straight from my bio. If you read that I went to Duke University, that's ROTC-only. I'm a Carolina boy; Tar Heels all the way. So anybody in there that might be from Duke University, I'm sorry, I'm not a real big -- (audio break).

So with that, I'll give you an update on my area and then open it up for any questions that you might have, anywhere from security to what I mentioned. Ted's got governance, economics and essential services, but either one of us can try to answer those questions as well.

But first of all, we've got the Adhamiya District on the east side of the river on the northeast side of Baghdad as well as Sadr City. So they're two very large districts -- Fort Baghdad, about 4 million strong,

in terms of the population density. About 40 percent of the Baghdad population kind of resides in our area of responsibility, as well as one Iraqi army division, the 11th Iraqi Army Division, which comprises the 42nd Iraqi Brigade as well as the 44th Iraqi Brigade that partners with us in the security component of our responsibilities over here.

Significant amount of progress, as I'm sure that you all know, has been made in the last year in terms of security, as well as the local governance and economic and essential services progress that we're seeing here on the ground.

To start off with Adhamiya briefly, we've -- when I got here, we were averaging roughly around six to seven attacks a day, which was actually down from the 14 attacks they were -- they were seeing prior to the surge. Since I've been here, in about a year now, we're down to less than one attack a day in the Adhamiya District, which is primarily a Sunni area, just on the river. And then it kind of transcends over to the Shi'a side as you move farther to the east. So a significant reduction in violence in that part of our area of responsibility. And I attribute that largely to what the Iraqi security forces have been able to do over the last year as we partner with them in defeating al Qaeda, which tends to be our biggest threat over here, as well as some special groups of criminals that do, in fact, operate in the Adhamiya district.

What I would call our main effort -- Ted and I's main effort -- is Sadr City, comprised of about 2.5 million people, as most of you might be familiar with; a large population density -- probably the largest density of Iraqis living in one area in Baghdad and probably all of Iraq; prior to the March time frame a very very kinetic area to operate in, not only for coalition forces but for Iraqi security forces.

But through the March-April-May time frame, a significant amount of combat operations were conducted in this area against the special- groups criminals, and some Jaish al-Madhi militia, that resulted in the cease-fire that you probably heard about in May that has really turned the corner, in our estimate, in terms of the special groups being significantly disrupted over here and, some would argue, actually defeated in some cases.

But they're certainly on the run inside and outside of Sadr City. I would kind of give you a brief highlight of that particular operation -- (audio break) -- open it up for any questions. But in March we had just about all of our checkpoints attacked by the special groups, causing the coalition forces to have to come in and assist the Iraqi security forces in and around Sadr City. And as you're probably aware, we had a large amount of rocket attacks that were coming out of Sadr City against the International Zone and the Green Zone.

Within about a six- to seven-day period of time, U.S. forces operating with the Iraqi security forces did achieve success in driving most of the rocket teams north of the area that we call the Gold Wall, that you may be familiar with -- driving them north of that area, and then over about a month period of time constructing a wall in order to defeat the special groups south of the southern part of Sadr City and then create what we call a safe neighborhood down there.

North of the wall, today the Iraqi security forces are operating where they'd never been able to operate before. We have four Iraqi battalions -- (audio break) -- and one Iraqi battalion south of the wall with us today. Because of the operations that were conducted in Sadr City, we had had significant amount of success against the militia, the special groups, that really had free rein up until about the March time frame.

Most of the key leaders fled around the middle of May, went to various countries or south of Baghdad, and today we're seeing some of those individuals try to make it back, but what's different -- what's different today that they did not see before is that they are, in fact, fugitives now. The Iraqi army is in pursuit of them, attacking them, capturing them and bringing them to justice. And I think that's one of the most significant changes that I have seen in my 12 months, is the Iraqi security forces' willingness and capability to actually go after some of the special-groups criminals that really did not have that to worry about, about seven months ago. So that's one of the most positive things I've seen, in my area, over the last 12 months, and not to mention a lot of the reconstruction that's been going on. Ted and I have been working very closely together, in the reconstruction efforts, particularly in the south part of Sadr City, with some of the aid that we definitely see the people, in terms of what their needs are.

There was a lot of heavy fighting done in that area; put about \$55 million of U.S.-sponsored aid into this part of Sadr City. Fourteen of that was Iraqi CERP, Commanders Emergency Response Program, that you've heard. And the other, the other part of that was the actual U.S. CERP that we, that we use as commanders here on the ground.

We've been able affect health clinics, schools, parks, to some extent, the electricity in this part of Sadr City as well as trash and sewage, which has been a major focus. And that has worked extremely well, not only in the security component but also giving the people a sense of normalcy and bringing this part of the city back to life.

And it's also had an impact on the government of Iraq, as they have watched kind of our support to the local government down here, in the south part of Sadr City, also start to see some progress up in the northern parts or the parts beyond the gold wall, as we call it.

So we're very encouraged with what we see, inside Sadr City, that we were not able to see last year and as early as March of this year. And Ted and I continue to work, in this part of our district or this part of our operational environment, to try to support the local government as well as the Iraqi security force.

Just some key points on this, and then I'll kind of open it up for questions in terms of my assessment of where we are today and where we were about eight months ago. Where we were not eight months ago, in terms of the security focus for my particularly district, was the security force was very focused on the al Qaeda threat but not so much in terms of their focus on the special groups criminals, Shi'a extremist threat.

Today, I think, as a result of the Basra fight, the Sadr City fight, as well as the fighting that was really going on all around Baghdad, against the special groups, we have seen a very focused and confident Iraqi security force today that are actually going after the special groups criminals. So I'd say that's a huge change, a significant change that we did not see as little as seven months ago. The other part of this is the government of Iraq's confidence in this, in getting after this part of the enemy that has been somewhat operating behind the scenes and affecting not only the coalition forces but the Iraqi security forces, not only in Baghdad but throughout the country.

Today we see a tremendous amount of confidence in the government of Iraq and their willingness to go after this part of the insurgency that has been relatively untouched for the last couple years. Today it is definitely on the run and has the government and the Iraqi security force focused on that.

Special groups targeting, too -- we've been very focused on targeting the special groups, as well as the -- what I would call the remnants of the al Qaeda network that still is trying to maintain itself inside Baghdad. And that's not only the coalition's targeting, but also the Iraqi security force targeting.

And then the Sons of Iraq and their ability to support the security, that piece right now is what -- we're in a transition phase, and that is the phase that we are providing -- transitioning the Sons of Iraq back over to the -- to the Iraqi security force. I should say transitioning them over to the Iraqi security force. We started this process about two months ago. I have 3,000 Sons of Iraq that work in the Adhamiya district, and we are not seeing any issues at all right now with this particular transition.

We just finished up our payday, which the Iraqi army paid the Sons of Iraq. And we were about 98 percent in terms of those that were on our rolls actually got paid by the Iraqi army. And I think that's great news. That's about the same kind of standard that we see in our own army today. So it shows you that they're taking this very seriously.

And the army is actually in charge of the Sons of Iraq. The leadership -- the Sons of Iraq report to the Iraqi army chain of command, something that we worked very hard on the last couple months. And so also I see that as a significant improvement in terms of security bringing the Sons of Iraq underneath the government of Iraq, as well as the Iraqi army.

So I'd offer those four points up to you as we look at progress here in terms of security changes that I've seen over the last 12 months and then -- as well as the reconstruction effort that we've been able to effect as a result of security that has been prevalent not only in Sadr City but throughout Adhamiya.

We've actually got street lights working in old Adhamiya. Today I had to park my humvee and wait for the red light to turn green light. I never -- you know, hadn't seen that before. At least, I didn't see that before about eight months ago. Water fountains are actually going off in old Adhamiya. So we're very encouraged by what we see over here.

We still have a threat -- the al Qaeda threat still exists, but very much disrupted, as well as the special groups threat is still out there. I would call the special groups there now more of a mafia organization than anything else with different mafia heads out there that are trying to affect this particular security gain that the Iraqi army, national police and police have been able to achieve.

So that's kind of my view of the world as I see it from a security standpoint. And I'll turn it over for any questions you may have on anything at all in terms of security, governance, economics or essential services.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. Well, thank you for that overview, and we'll get right into questions. So we'll get started with David.

Q Colonel, this is David Morgan from Reuters. Given Sadrist opposition to the SOFA agreement, how do you assess the threat of violence emanating from that issue? And do you think the May cease-fire could be vulnerable in that context?

COL. HORT: David, I hate to ask you to ask that question again, but you were a little bit loud in my earpiece there. So if you could ask the question one more time, and maybe we could get the sound just a little bit better, and I'll be able to answer it for you. I apologize.

Q Sure.

The question is this: Given the Sadrist opposition to the SOFA agreement, how do you assess the threat of violence on that count? And is it possible that the May cease-fire could be vulnerable to violence coming from opposition to the SOFA?

COL. HORT: What -- my assessment right now of that particular part of the insurgency is that it is -- it is severely disrupted. As I mentioned, a lot of the leaders left, and they -- we've seen some return of the leadership, either from different countries like Iran or Syria or wherever they fled to, or in parts from the south that they've come back. But they have not all come back. And so that part of the leadership -- at least 50 percent, in my estimation -- is still missing that we saw prior to the May cease-fire. So the leadership itself is not completely intact yet to really affect a large-scale uprising or anything that we have seen before. We still watch that very closely.

But the enemy was also significantly impacted, the special groups in particular, through the March-May time frame.

You know, there's approximately 800 of those individuals either killed in action or severely wounded, no longer capable of fighting -- (audio break) -- great deal of effort through the June-July-August time frame in targeting the lower-grade, lower-tier-level individuals that did not flee the city, not only through coalition but through the Iraqi security force.

So we see that there's a threat. But we don't see it to the extent that we, you know, we might have seen it last year or as early as March or April of this year, if I answered your question.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

On the special groups that you've been speaking about, in your opening statement, how many special group members, do you still assess, are in your area or they're waiting to fight? And then can you give us a little bit of a better idea of the strength of them?

You mentioned that they were like a mafia organization. But can you just give us another characterization for what kind of strength they still have, what kind of a threat they continue to pose to your area and beyond? And then can you also just talk a little bit about who these special group members are specifically?

COL. HORT: In terms of like what we saw in the March time frame, we had several of these special groups leaders. And I'll give you one, for example, a guy by the name of -- Abu Durah (sp). He lived up in, worked, operated up in the northern part of Sadr City we call the second base area. If you have a map,

it's kind of the northwest quadrant of Sadr City. He operated up there and conducted attacks out of there on a daily basis almost, against Iraqi security forces, coalition forces.

Today, that individual has fled the country and relies on lieutenants right now to kind of conduct his operations. And those lieutenants have been significantly disrupted as well with Iraqi special operations forces, Iraqi army going in and capturing them, not on a daily basis. But certainly we have had significant success against that particular part of the special groups network.

But to answer your questions, in terms of how many, I would say that, you know, as you look at the key leaders, we kind of track about 15 to 20 key leaders, of which 10 to 12 of those we currently see trying to work their way back into Sadr City or may already be back in Sadr City.

In terms of their following, it's hard to say. It kind of gets tied into also the Jaish al-Mahdi militia that, you know, kind of followed Muqtada al-Sadr's following there, and what equals special groups and what equals JAM sometimes. But I would say that it's very small number, probably anywhere from 2,000, maybe, or 4,000, at best, in terms of what they were able to muster.

What we faced during the Sadr City fight was about 2,000 individuals that tried to fight us on a daily basis. We were averaging about 40 attacks a day down in the south part of Sadr City. And I mentioned that we believe we probably killed or seriously injured about 7(00) or 800 of those. So I don't think that they have a large capacity. We're not seeing that on a -- we're not seeing that out on our battlefield, certainly. We haven't had an attack in the area of Shaab, which is just out of Sadr City, in the last four months. Prior to March, that was probably averaging probably two or three attacks a day in the Shaab area, which is, like I said, just on the northwest side of Sadr City.

So I don't think it's significant. It's still a threat. It is hard to count, but I don't believe it's nearly what it was prior to the March time frame -- (inaudible).

MR. WHITMAN: Do you want to follow up?

Q Yeah, if I just could follow up really quickly, Colonel, and then could you just tell us a little bit about who specifically you're characterizing as the special group members?

COL. HORT: We kind of characterize the special groups as those that are unaligned with not only the government but also what the religious leaders like Muqtada al-Sadr is trying to push toward, which we see as more of a political reconciliation with the government. The special groups do not follow either one of those and therefore kind of create their own little organization out there, the mafia-type organization, like I mentioned, with Abu Durah; another guy by the name of Sheikh Bakr (sp), who also fled, who is not listening to any of the leadership, whether it be Muqtada al-Sadr or the government of Iraq or anyone else that's more focused on the political reconciliation or the political movement.

And so that's kind of how we look at the special-groups criminals that really are criminals -- (audio break) -- thugs that are more interested in power and, in some cases, have a religious connotation to it. But more often than not it's more power-based than anything else.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go Ken, Jim and Joe. And we'll see if we have any time after that.

Q Ken Fireman from Bloomberg News. A question for both Colonel Hort and Dr. Andrews. It now looks like there's a good chance that the SOFA will take effect, given what happened in the cabinet yesterday. If it does take effect, how will that affect the environment -- the political and the security environment in which both of you and your people operate? And how will it affect your day-to-day operations?

COL. HORT: Did you want to --

DR. ANDREWS: Let me just -- excuse me, let me just take an initial swing at that. I don't see any immediate effect on our operations. Our -- (audio break) -- in promoting governance, promoting economic development, promoting essential services for the people.

On this day-to-day level, the SOFA is not a big issue, not with the local-level politicians with whom we're working most closely. It's obviously a piece of the background news and people, I think, will be a little bit apprehensive in the day or so after it, but there's no great apprehension of major problems.

The election is coming up. A lot of the leaders down at the provincial level are really concerned about that. A lot of them are going to be running for the election. And they're also really worried about how are they going to get services in their area. And that's the focus of things, not the SOFA.

COL. HORT: I would just say from the -- taking the security standpoint as we look at SOFA -- (audio break) -- obviously been able to read, kind of, exactly what all of the points and pieces of it are, but as I understand it, it will probably look something like a transition period for coalition to move more to a perimeter type of, you know, support to the Iraqi security forces inside of Baghdad.

And right now, where we are is we're kind of doing that already. And really, with the exception of Sadr City, which we kind of -- is kind of right in the middle of the city, the bases that I have like War Eagle, for example, is kind of on the perimeter of the city. And we pushed down into the city, worked with the Iraqi leadership, closely with General Mazzuah (sp), the division commander as well as the brigade commanders.

And so, I think there will be some transition that we have to work through if that's, in fact, where's going. But in general right now, with the exception of Sadr City, we're kind of already moving in that direction, even prior to the SOFA with the Iraqi army taking more and more responsibility, more and more of the lead, particularly the targeting of the bad people -- and I talked about, the special groups, but also the al Qaeda that is not -- is still somewhat out there within certain parts of our area. So I don't -- I don't see a significant change.

We do have some joint security stations and combat outposts that are inside the city that we would probably have to push more out towards the perimeter of the city, but I think that we can work through all of that. And I just will say that the Iraqi army today, more so than when I was an adviser, has got a tremendous amount of confidence in themselves and is doing more and more each and every day that we work with them.

Q For Dr. Andrews, you said that some people in your area may feel a little bit of apprehension about the SOFA. Could you specify what the source of their apprehension would be? What will they be concerned about?

DR. ANDREWS: No, I think -- I'll backtrack a little bit from that, but the issue's that they hear the news stories and just wonder whether things might happen. A few days ago we met with some leaders and they said: Oh, did you hear, the -- you know, that the cabinet had made this decision? Do you think anything is going to happen? And we could say we don't think anything serious will happen.

So it's an issue in the news. People here have been through a lot over the last few years, and they've got very -- you know, they have paid, almost all of them, some sort of personal price. So they've got an obvious concern, but I don't think there's anything specific that they know that we don't know about, of any great danger, that's going to arise simply by the signing of this.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I was wondering if you could talk to what the public sentiment is, and particularly in the Sadr City area, and whether their sentiment is such that special groups or those types of forces could regenerate, or whether it's moving in the other direction and therefore would not provide as fertile a ground for recruitment.

COL. HORT: That's a great question. The sentiment right now that -- what we currently see -- and I get feedback from the Iraqi army that's north of the area that we don't go -- we call it the Gold Wall -- is very, very positive to the Iraqi security force. And that's their feedback. And so what we also do is check that through local nationals that we have hired to go north of the wall to get atmospherics on the different -- (audio break) -- that we've had some concerns with in the past.

And we are also getting the same type of feedback, which is, the people of Sadr City are very satisfied with the security situation right now, much more than they've ever been before; the first time that a true, legitimate security element has been able to operate inside Sadr City for many, many years. So that's kind of the good news that we are seeing from the people. The frustration still is the -- kind of the slow process or the slow progress within the government north of the wall in terms of some of the reconstruction, essential services that they don't see existing or occurring like they have down in the areas that we currently operate.

And so our job right now is we hear those assessments is to just try to continue to work with Ted and the other side of the river with the central government to try to work to get those -- (audio break) -- moving a little bit quicker so that people can see not just the security element that they're very pleased with but also the governance and the essential services moving. So that's kind of the feedback that we see within Sadr City right now.

DR. ANDREWS: I would just add to that that the biggest problem that we would face is not the -- the biggest problem we would face is that people sometimes feel a little bit hopeless after all the years of fighting that they've had. And the thing we're trying to push them for is not to feel that, not to feel helpless, to let them know they've got institutions that can work to represent their interests, to push their interests. And we're trying to show that there's benefits of working in a democratic way, and I think the vast majority of people in our area get that. So there are services, there is pressure to get more services and that's -- (audio break).

MR. WHITMAN: (Inaudible.)

Q Okay. This is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. Quick question. Based on your assessment, how do you see the current status of Jaish al-Mahdi, and how do you see its future?

COL. HURT: Sir, could you repeat that question? I apologize for not hearing you clearly.

MR. WHITMAN: (Inaudible) -- from the podium here. The question was, how do you assess the future of Jaish al-Mahdi?

COL. HORT: Well, right now, what we -- in terms of the future of the Jaish al-Mahdi militia that kind of supports, you know, the Muqtada al-Sadr viewpoint is we are certainly encouraging through our Iraqi military counterparts and the local government, you know, a political -- (audio break) -- way ahead here is the venue to -- if they do think that change needs to be made, that that's the way to it. And that's kind of what we're seeing right now, at least at my level, is the -- I would say the mainstream Jaish al-Mahdi militias have not picked up arms, have not necessarily gone back to a violent method, that are trying to look at themselves more in terms of the political apparatus that is within the country right now more than anything else. And so that's kind of what I see on my side -- at my level. And talking with the Iraqi military that operates a lot inside the parts of Sadr City that I don't go to, they are not seeing the militia that we used to see before, which was brandishing weapons, controlling neighborhoods, extorting money.

And one of the true signs that we see in change is the Jamila market. This market is inside Sadr City. It's the largest market in Baghdad, and I think in Iraq, if I'm not mistaken. It basically distributes out to all different parts of the city, as well as receives the goods in.

So it's a large, large market that supports, you know, millions of people in the city of Baghdad. That market used to be the primary funding -- financing of the Jaish al Mahdi militia, as well as parts of the special groups. Today, that's a free market, controlled by the market owners, the businessmen, as well as those that lease the stalls in that area, and we're not seeing any extortion at all. So that's a sign of progress that the Jaish al Mahdi militia are trying to step away from that type of nefarious activity that they were doing before.

And so that's -- that's where we would like to see it go. If it changes course, you know, I can't say right now and I really don't know, but certainly that's what we're trying to encourage with the people that I've talked to, if I've answered your question.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you. And thank you again for taking the time this morning to spend some time with us and to answer some of the questions that we had. Before I bring it to a close, though, let me throw it back to you in case you have any final thoughts.

COL. HORT: Thanks, Bryan.

I appreciate the time and Ted -- and Ted and I really appreciate the opportunity to talk to the Pentagon press corps here. And I'd like to wish to wish of you all a happy Thanksgiving; I know we're about a week-and-a-half out. But that's something that we look forward to as the -- a little bit of the holiday spirit here in Iraq. One being Thanksgiving, the other one being Christmas coming up.

And, obviously, I'd like to thank all the families back there that have been very much a part of this fight that we've been in for the last 12 months. We're a 15-month brigade, so we're on our 12th month

now -- 12th month now going on another three. A lot of families back in the state-side, particularly in Colorado, you know, are feeling the strain and the stress of these types of deployments, as we are over here, but I can't tell you how proud I am of them and what they've been able to accomplish out there, keeping everything together so that we can focus on the mission here inside of Baghdad, as well as other parts of the city where I have other units assigned to this brigade. So, I just wanted to say thank you for allowing me to say that to my families, and thanks for letting us say a few words tonight.

DR. ANDREWS: I just wanted to add a couple of things. We certainly feel our team -- there are 17 of us -- we're very excited to be associated with the 3rd BCT. We're very much part of -- embedded with these units, and sadly the names of a couple of our members are on the board of people who lost their lives in the fighting here. Our guys have been there with the brigade in these operations, and we're glad that we now have the conditions in which we can spread our elbows a bit more and do a bit more of our activities without the fighting.

I arrived the day that bombardment started in the Green Zone, and now we can go into Sadr City and work certainly without much hindrance, at least in that lower third of it.

So -- you know, I thank Colonel Hort and all the men and the women of those brigades.

COL. HORT: Bryan, we're going to be home before March. So if you've got -- anybody's who got Final Four -- NCAA Final Four tickets for North Carolina going to Detroit, Michigan, I would certainly appreciate it. Over.

MR. WHITMAN: (Laughter) Well, I think we've got -- successfully gotten the word out on that, then.

Well, thank you again. On behalf of everybody here, we wish you the best. And thank you for your time and for all your efforts on both of your -- on the part of both of your teams there. Thank you.

COL. HORT: Thanks, everybody.

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